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TRADE-UNION ORGANIZATION IN THE UNITED STATES.

LABOR has sought many forms of organization by which to protect its rights and advance its interests; of these none has proved more continuous in existence or effective in operation than the trade union. Referring to its general success, Professor Marshall has said: "The brilliant though checkered career of the trades-unions has been more full of interest and instruction than anything else in English history."¹ The industrial community of England is fortunate in having a more or less complete and detailed account of its trade-union development on which such an assertion may be based. The history of trade-unionism in America remains unwritten. The extent of the movement today, and such scattered records as are to be had from various sources, give promise that a careful investigation of the subject will reveal as interesting a chapter in American industrial development as Professor Marshall and others have found in that of England. Silently and continuously thousands of producers in America have been gathering into organized local groups, which in turn have been uniting in central bodies or becoming parts of still larger federations. A movement such as this, which aims at embracing within a complete organization the greater part of the population of an entire continent is one destined to be of importance in industrial history and one worthy of minute and detailed examination.

A trade union has been well defined as a "continuous association of wage-earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their employment."² This definition, while it does not deny their influence on the general trade-union develop-

¹ *Principles of Economics* (3d ed.), vol. i. p. 47.

² *The History of Trade-Unionism*, by SIDNEY and BEATRICE WEBB (London, 1894), p. 11.

ment excludes on the one hand the many organizations which are formed from merely political or social motives, and on the other such combinations of wage-earners as may arise from time to time with the ostensible object of maintaining or improving the condition of members, but which in the end prove ephemeral and fail to pass into permanent trade societies. The essential feature of the association is that it connects itself primarily with the trade or trades to which its members may belong. Associations of wage-earners are likely to prove continuous only when their members recognize that as a class they are destined to continue subject always to the conditions of hire. This probably accounts for the late development of trade-unionism in England and its still later development in America. In each country the rise of the factory system more than anything else stimulated, and to a degree rendered necessary, some form of continuous union among the workers. In England trade-unionism is divisible into two distinct periods, the one previous to the factory régime and the other coincident with it. The earlier period extended over the greater part of the eighteenth century, but throughout that time unions were formed for the most part only in such trades as permitted an extended division of labor and in which such division of labor had become the common practice. In the United States trade unions were unknown prior to the beginning of the present century. The factory system having begun during the first decade, a parallel to the English movement will be found only for its second period.

During the first quarter of the century there was practically no trade-union development or "labor movement" in America. The reasons for this are obvious enough. The country was as yet but thinly peopled, the largest centers presented but few of the complex problems which are common to the cities of today, and change from one kind of employment to another was not difficult or uncommon among the wage-earners. If the latter were dissatisfied with the conditions of their trade they had in many instances the land to fall back upon, whereas if ordinary

diligence and skill were not wanting the opportunities of rising to positions of authority were fair enough. There are instances, however, of associations of laborers having taken permanent form, and these are not without interest or significance. The tailors appear to have been the first to establish the present form of trade union, their organization dating back to 1806. This enables us to trace a direct line of connection between the trade unions of England and those of America, a connection, strangely enough, which links the oldest union of the latter country with the oldest union of the former. It is generally conceded that the Journeyman Tailors' Union is the oldest permanent trade organization in England, it having had a continuous existence for nearly two centuries. The tailors who organized in America in 1806 had prior to their coming to this continent been members of the union in the mother country. They continued their membership in the English union for some time after settling here, but in the year above mentioned decided to sever the old connection and form a separate union based in its essentials on the English model. An analogous case was that of the hatters who were organized in 1819. There were doubtless many other local organizations formed, purporting, perhaps, to be trade unions, but they are denied a place in the present outline, as it does not appear that they had a continuous existence. It is more than certain, for example, that associations of shipbuilders existed from time to time during the eighteenth and possibly through part of the seventeenth century. Shipbuilding was the first great manufacturing industry in America and was carried on throughout the colonial period along the eastern shore of the continent. The workers were for the most part skilled craftsmen who had come to this country from England where, as has been pointed out, organization would not have been unfamiliar to them, but the circumstances under which they labored were not such as to necessitate or ensure a continuous union among them. There is a record, however, of the New York Society of Journeymen Shipwrights having been incorporated on April 3, 1803, and a union of the house carpenters of

the city of New York in 1806.¹ This much may be claimed, that when pressure did come and it was rendered urgent that workers should combine to gain a common end, the "building trades" exerted themselves so vigorously as to merit the place not unfrequently accredited to them, of being the pioneers of the labor movement on this continent. It was in connection with the ten-hour workday that the struggle of organized labor first began and it was along the Atlantic seaboard, where the ship carpenters and calkers were engaged, that agitation was the keenest and the earliest successes achieved.²

From 1825 to 1830 many local unions were formed in the various trades. They were followed in rapid succession by others up to 1850, the interval constituting the formative period of trade unions in this country. Since then no year has elapsed in which local bodies have not sprung into existence; some of these have proved short-lived, others have been submerged in periods of depression and have revived on the return of better times. At the present day there is possibly not a trade deserving mention which has escaped organization along union lines. The extension of unions from one trade to another, and in the same trade throughout all parts of the land, has been continuous and progressive. It is on this broad foundation that the superstructure of a more perfect organization has been reared.

It is evident that however efficiently each trade may be organized locally but little permanent good can be accomplished without some form of concerted action. This combining of forces may be effected in two ways. First, the organized trades of one locality may, whilst preserving their autonomy, unite in one central body which has as its object the furthering of those interests which are common to all trades; secondly, the various local bodies of a particular trade, scattered through all parts of the country, may be held together by a larger organization, to which may be referred matters of general interest within the trade, the local unions being still at liberty to guard the welfare

¹ ELY, *The Labor Movement in America*, p. 38.

² MCNEIL, *The Labor Movement the Problem of Today* (1887), p. 74 *et seq.*

of the individual members belonging to their group. The first method is the first step in the organization of *different* trades, the second method is the second step in the more perfect organization of *individual* trades. Both processes may be working simultaneously, and, as a matter of fact, have been so working in the United States for over forty years.

Having in mind the condition of the country, and the distribution of the population during the first half of the present century, it will be easily understood how the first method of organization was in point of time the first to be adopted. The cities and towns, with few exceptions, had not assumed such proportions that the members of all trades were not more or less closely associated. Their interests during this period were more likely to be general than particular, the gaining of a ten-hour law being, for example, an aim which all would have in common. On the other hand, the wage-earners in a particular town knew comparatively little of their fellow-workmen, those even of their own trade, who resided in some other part of the state. The means of communication were slight, and anything like concerted action by members of a trade thus widely scattered was well-nigh impossible. Accordingly we find that for fifteen years before the unions of a particular trade were held together by a superior organization, the workingmen of different trades within separate localities were being formed into central bodies on the basis of the interests which they held in common. The first to be so formed was that known as the General Trades Unions of the City of New York, organized in 1833. Almost at the same time there was formed a general trade union of the mechanics of Boston and the vicinity, the latter body being composed at its first meeting of delegates from sixteen local unions. Since then similar bodies, known as trades assemblies or central trades and labor councils, have been organized in most of the cities and important towns. In 1861 the scattered unions in California and in San Francisco were organized, and the period following the close of the Civil War witnessed a rapid growth in this as in other forms of union organization. While the number of these central trades assemblies increases with their formation in

progressive towns, the ones already in existence continue to grow in importance with each increase in the number of local unions.

The second method of organization, that, namely, in which the unions of a particular trade are themselves united, was first adopted by the scattered printers' unions in the eastern states. To this higher form of organization is given the name "national," it being intended that all local unions in the country which are of the particular trade shall come within its jurisdiction. The National Typographical Union, the first to be so formed, was organized in Cincinnati in 1852. By 1860 no less than twenty-six trades were organized on national lines. Their number has increased rapidly ever since, and the membership in each at the present day varies from two to twenty-five thousand.

Some of the trades in the United States have adopted an "international" organization. It differs but little from the national save in extent of jurisdiction, but in no case does this jurisdiction extend to any other country but Canada. The term "continental" would therefore be more strictly applicable. The Iron Moulders' Union of North America, founded in 1859, was the first to become an international organization. The Machinists' and Blacksmiths' Union of North America, founded in the same year, has practically ceased to exist. Where of late years a higher plan of organization has been adopted the international appears to have been the most generally accepted. The trade interests of Canada and the United States are so nearly identical that this method is all the more imperative.

A step of importance to be noted in connection with the national or international organization is the union of allied trades which accompanies it. Thus the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers embraces local unions, the members of some of which are engaged in work auxiliary to, but sufficiently different from, that of their fellows to necessitate their primary organization into separate bodies. The association, when first formed in 1876, was made up of such organizations as the Iron and Steel Roll Hands, the Associated Brotherhood of Iron and

Steel Heaters, Rollers and Roughers, and the United Sons of Vulcan, the last named being composed chiefly of iron boilers and puddlers. Each of these in turn was further subdivided. The more general interests of particular trades are bound up in the common interest of all, and it is this common interest which the larger organization seeks to protect. As there are complementary groups of commodities so there are complementary groups of workers, and these are brought together in the national or international associations. In some instances local unions have been united into state organizations, but this form is more usually a step in national arrangement than a separate factor by itself.

A last and still higher form of organization in the trade-union development is that embodied in the American Federation of Labor. As its name signifies, it is a federation, more or less complete, of the minor bodies already described. It is an organization of organizations; a union of unions, international, national, state, central, and local. It was formed originally at Pittsburg in 1881 under the name, "The Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions of the United States and America," and was modeled after the Trades-Union Congress of England. Five years later it received the present name. Local bodies are not allowed to discuss politics in their meetings, but at the annual convention of the federation delegates are sent to it from the local bodies, and there discuss questions of a political nature. Its main object is to watch legislation and to bring about such enactments as may be beneficial to the working classes. At the same time it constantly seeks a thorough federation "embracing every trade and labor organization in America, under the trades-union system of organization."¹ It is distinctively a representative organization, and bodies entitled to representation are said to be affiliated. While most of the international and national trade unions are thus affiliated, there are still some which are not. There are over 1500 affiliated local

¹ Preamble of the revised constitution of the American Federation of Labor, as drawn up at the Baltimore convention, December 16, 1887.

unions which have not as yet a national organization ; but there remain also several thousand other unaffiliated local unions with no national head. While not formally connected with the Federation, it may be said that in theory many are united by virtue of a common polity. There are in some cities groups of workers from a limited number of trades designating themselves as federal-labor organizations, and having no connection with the central trades assemblies. Many of these are affiliated with the American Federation of Labor.

An account of organized labor and even trade-unionism would be incomplete without admitting to a conspicuous place the most prominent federation in the country today, the Knights of Labor. This organization may lay claim to a wider field than the one entered into by the trade unions. In many respects the two are closely allied and in the objects which they desire to attain there is on the whole a striking similarity. The difference lies, mainly, in the methods by which each hopes to achieve the common goal. The trade unions properly so-called are restricted in membership to skilled workmen, those, namely, who have a particular trade and follow it. The Knights of Labor, on the other hand, include the unskilled as well as the skilled, and in so doing endeavor to gather into their ranks labor in whatever form it may be found. The idea of vocation is practically ignored. This broader organization shows the increasing complexity of the labor problem, and is evidence of the truth that if one grade of artisans is to be effectually bettered in its economic condition, it must be in common with and not by the exclusion of fellow-workingmen of lower rank. The invention of new machinery, the improvement in technical processes, and the consequent extension of division of labor and changes in methods of manufacture in many employments have all tended to diminish the requirement of special skill with the result that unskilled labor, which is always abundant, is likely at any time to be called upon and put to work, like part of the machine, at a particular step in the process which has been rendered comparatively simple. The founders of the

Knights of Labor perceived this tendency and in the plan of organization as adopted at Philadelphia in 1869 sought in the scheme of admission to membership a means of meeting it. The order has now within its ranks men of all classes, farmers as well as mechanics. It has been much appreciated by female workers, for whom it has always claimed equal rights in matters relating to their employment, and it has proved a boon to the negroes of the South, who have been at all times eligible for membership, and who are in nowise discriminated against. The general measures favored by the Knights of Labor are much in accord with those demanded by the American Federation of Labor. There is a strong opposition to the contract system on national, state, and municipal work, a desire to gain a reduction in the hours of labor to eight per day, and an increase where possible of the rate of wages. They are opposed to the hiring out of convict labor and to the importation of foreign labor under contract. They favor the compulsory attendance at school of children between the ages of seven and fifteen years, and the prohibition of the employment of child labor. They advocate government control of all telegraphs, telephones, and railroads, and look for the day when established coöperative institutions will tend to supersede the wage-system.

The local societies of the Knights of Labor are called assemblies. These may be composed entirely of men of one trade or of those following various pursuits. Above the local are the district assemblies, based sometimes on geographical, and at others on trade, distinctions. Some of the local bodies are not included in any district, but are directly subordinate to the highest authority, the general assembly. This is a delegate body, or congress, representing the entire order. While the local assemblies may represent different trades and callings in life, they are bound in certain particulars by one uniform system of laws and regulations, their ritual and proceedings being the same in all parts of the country. While in some cases room is provided within the order for separate trade unions with their own rules and regulations, these are subject, nevertheless, to the general assembly. The American Federation of Labor, on the

other hand, is a federation of various orders dissimilar in their methods of organization, and having no common constitution or laws. The general assembly of the Knights of Labor is composed of delegates from its subordinate branches, but the annual national convention of the American Federation of Labor consists of delegates from its affiliated societies. Each affiliated society, however, has its own government distinct from the government of the national convention.

Mr. Wright has discovered in the American Railway Union formed in Chicago in 1893 an organization worthy of comparison with the Knights of Labor and the American Federation¹ of Labor. Its exceedingly rapid growth and its importance as a compact organization of all classes of railway employees makes it a most important factor in the labor world. It is composed of a general union made up of a board of directors and local unions instituted under the jurisdiction of the general order. Judged by this method of organization it does not appear to differ materially from the large national organizations. Its distinctive feature is the attempted union of all railway employees under one jurisdiction, and this is precisely what a complete national organization seeks. Transportation facilities being what they are today the number of railway employees is exceedingly large, and the character of their employment in many instances very dissimilar. This has rendered possible national organization among particular groups, as, for example, the engineers, conductors or switchmen. The American Railway Union is a federation in so much as it combines the *allied* organizations of employees of one great branch of industry, but unlike the American Federation of Labor or the Knights of Labor it does not consist of organizations of *different* trades, in which their true *federal* character consists. The American Railway Union bears out the tendency found to exist in national bodies, that, namely, of including within their ranks many allied trades, and like some of the others it has effected an alliance of allied organizations. As such it is a remarkable development of a particular type; still it

¹ *Industrial Evolution of the United States*, by CARROLL D. WRIGHT (1895), p. 260.

does not appear to embrace any new or higher form of organization.

Brief mention must still be made of other associations designed to protect and advance the interests of workingmen, and which have influenced to a considerable degree their attitude towards industrial problems. These associations connect themselves only indirectly or incidentally with the trade-union movement and viewed in the light of their relation to it may be grouped under three heads: (1) those associations which are modeled more or less directly on the trade-union type of organization but which embrace in their membership a class other than those usually found in trade unions; (2) organizations which at one time in their history exerted a powerful influence on the organizing of labor and were instrumental in paving the way for future operations, but which proved to have only a transitory existence and have perished; (3) associations of workers composed largely of members of trade unions, but which are in fact political bodies.

The most important association falling within the first group is that known as the Patrons of Husbandry, or more familiarly as the Grangers. The order was founded in December 1867, and was an attempt to organize the farming community for the protection of their interests. Its membership as a consequence was composed of independent farmers, and not, like the trade unions, of employees. The parallel to the trade union, however, is clearly traceable in the structural organization. The local units are called granges, these are united in state granges, and over these again is the national grange. But a curious difference exists in the historical development. The national grange was the first organized, and from it were granted the charters to subordinate local bodies. In the case of the trade unions, they were well organized locally before the national bodies were formed, and these in turn preceded the federation. The plan of granting charters to subordinate unions was adopted, however, after the national organizations were formed. The aims of the Patrons of Husbandry are somewhat general and indefinite.

In their "Declaration of Purposes" the hope is expressed that the organization may foster a better understanding and coöperation among its members, all "systems" tending to prodigality and bankruptcy are discountenanced, as, for example, the credit system, the mortgage system, and the fashion system. Litigation is to be avoided and as a substitute the members are requested to seek arbitration in the grange. The tyranny of monopolies is to be opposed and a proper appreciation of the abilities of women acknowledged by admission to the privileges of full membership. A connection has been formed in several states between the Patrons of Husbandry and the Knights of Labor, where their mutual interests in city and country can be best protected. In some instances rural assemblies of the Knights of Labor have been organized. The Farmers' Alliance is another important organization among members of the rural community; it is chiefly political in its nature.

There is a large number of organizations which have been prominent at one time or another. Excepting such as were limited in their field of operation and noting only those which were intended to be far reaching, the National Labor Union, organized in 1867, appears to be the first of importance. It was the same body which had been formed the year before as the National Labor Party which in turn had been the result of a national congress secured through a call from the trades assemblies in New York and Baltimore. An extract from the preamble to the constitution of the National Labor Party is most instructive as indicating the precise condition of labor at the time and the need for some higher form of organization. It also bears out what has been already said in reference to the order of trade-union development. "Hitherto," so reads the preamble, "the highest form labor association has taken is the national union of some of our trades. Between these organizations, however, there has been no sympathetic or systematic connection, no coöperative effort, no working for the attainment of a common end, the want of which has been experienced for many years by every craft and calling." Here was the cry for

federation, and the National Labor Union sought to answer it. Had the organization when formed held to its purpose as thus stated, it would doubtless have had a continuous existence. But it sold its birthright to political intriguers, and the last heard of it was in 1872 at which date it held a convention at Columbus, Ohio.

In 1869 an order known as the Knights of St. Crispin was established on an international basis. Its brief history is interesting both on account of the proportions it assumed in the period of its existence, and also because in its structural arrangement it anticipated the later forms of complete organization. The local unions were known as lodges, these were joined together in state or provincial grand lodges, which in turn were represented in the international grand lodge, the supreme power of the order. A separate branch composed of women was called the Daughters of St. Crispin. The order gained its strongest hold among the boot and shoe makers, but the crisis of 1873 marked the beginning of its decay. Internal dissension more than anything else led to its final extinction within a few years.

The International Labor Union of America was organized in 1877. Its influence was never great, though at one time it had branches in seventeen states of the Union. Its aims were chiefly those in common with the larger federations of today. The methods by which it was proposed to secure them make it of interest in the trade-union development. These methods are set out in the declaration of principles as follows: "(1) The formation of an amalgamated union of laborers, so that members of any calling can combine under a central head and form a part of the amalgamated trades unions; (2) the organization of all workingmen in their trades unions and the creation of such unions where none exist; (3) the national and international amalgamation of all labor unions." The scheme was a good one, and, as we have seen, has since been adopted by the American Federation of Labor. Its workings under the original body, however, were not successful and the International Labor Union of 1877 expired after a brief existence.

An organization of interest as illustrating the ambitious attempts made by wage-earners to combine their forces on all sides, was the International Workingmen's Association which was formed in Europe in 1863, and which held international congresses in some of the leading industrial centers. During 1870 and 1871 this organization commenced to form branches in the United States, claiming that the hitherto disconnected movements of the several countries had effected but little for the "emancipation of the working classes." It provided for annual congresses and a general council, in addition to which there were federal councils or committees and local societies. The undertaking was too large, and, possibly also, too much in advance of the times. As a consequence its existence in this country was very short. There are at present a few foreign trade societies which have members in America; these, however, exercise little, if any, influence on the trade-union development here.

Under the third group of organizations, namely, the political, might be placed a list dating continuously from the first quarter of the century down to the present time. In the period prior to the Civil War are to be found many instances of workingmen's parties, mechanics' leagues, reform labor associations, and the like. Most of these were confined to the larger cities or individual states, and not unfrequently did they direct the greater part of their energies towards securing the passage of some one particular law. The election of a "labor candidate" during this early period was not an uncommon thing.

Passing over the many minor political bodies, it may be said that the most distinctively political labor organization of today is the Socialist Labor Party. Its leaders are for the most part disciples of Carl Marx, and they look to the establishment of a political party which will lead to the control of government by the wage-labor class. In their plan of campaign an effort is made to work through existing organizations and for this reason the trade unions and the Knights of Labor are eagerly sought after as a means to an end. The party is fairly well organized throughout the United States and Canada, and its propaganda is

already a feature in most electoral contests. Just where to draw the line between the political and the distinctively trade aspects of many of the larger labor associations is becoming yearly a more difficult task. Next to internal dissension no other single factor has been so ruinous to successful association among workingmen as political intrigue, and for this reason the wisest leaders have always deprecated the introduction of politics into their unions or trades assemblies.

Such are the lines along which trade-union organization in America has developed. This organization is still far from being in any sense complete, and the accounts which one reads daily of disturbances within the ranks show that even yet the movement has not lost the constantly fluctuating or checkered aspect which has been a characteristic since its inception. To whole masses of workers anything like organization is still wanting, and the stage has not as yet been passed when years of commercial or industrial panic have ceased to add their quota to the number by breaking up in some cases hitherto organized groups. In this age when there is a tendency, especially among large sections of workingmen, to seek for better conditions along new and somewhat radical lines, and a parallel tendency to "cry down" old and existing institutions, laborers will do well to consider what these older organizations have accomplished in the past, what their more perfect development promises for the future, and what are the reasons which should lead them at this particular time to accept or reject a plan of social and industrial betterment which never before has had more reasonable opportunities or better facilities for ultimate success.

How the trade union has developed within itself, what difficulties it has had to encounter, and with what measure of success it has overcome them; what it has done for the members in the past and what inducements it holds out to others for the future, is shown by the life history of the oldest national union in existence, the Typographical, which merits separate presentation.

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